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Leading the teaching of reading

Greg Wallace

Opinion piece

Resource

Leading the teaching of reading

Greg Wallace, Executive Principal, Best Start Federation, London

At the heart of almost every school's mission statement will be a commitment to securing high levels of literacy for all pupils. It is great that the belief is shared so widely. Everyone wants every child to read. Fantastic!

But not everyone agrees on how they should be taught to do this. In fact, as you may have noticed, sometimes the debate gets a little intense. One of the words that raises the tension levels is phonics.

I started teaching in 1992 in Lewisham, South East London. Previously I had trained at Goldsmiths' College. I have very fond memories of those days – and every now and then a pupil I taught in my Year 6 class in the early 1990s contacts me and makes me feel very old! When I taught at Perrymount Primary in Lewisham, the headteacher was Linda Miller. Linda is now retired and works across our federation.

In the early 1990s my experience of 'teaching' reading would involve me listening to children read every day after lunch. I would make notes on primary reading sample forms about the errors the children made: when they got it wrong did they self-correct? Did they substitute another word? I would sit at my desk with one child and the other twenty nine children were meant to be reading in silence. The two acronyms then prevalent for silent reading were USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) and ERIC (Everyone Reads In Class).

I am sure some of the children were reading silently. Quite a few would not be and would be catching each others' eyes, or scowling after a lunchtime disagreement. Some were not reading because they could not. Others were pretending to read from books that were too hard for them: what they could read was at such a basic level they chose harder books so as not to stand out.

We were often told that we should 'model' reading during USSR (we still tell teachers this now, but it is not the modelling of the early 1990s.) What we were supposed to do then was to sit at our desk, or in the reading corner, reading a book of our own. I think the idea was that children would then see how good reading was and they would copy us. We were encouraged to read newspapers to broaden children's experience of text types. I am sure there were some teachers who loved reading newspapers after lunch whilst their classes sat in silence, some reading, some desperately frustrated that they could not. I have to say now, rebellious from the beginning, that I never sat reading a paper or anything else.

So, two-and-a-half hours per week were spent in this way. If you whizzed through the children you could hear all 30 once a week, for around 3 minutes. Much of that time was sent getting them to find a book they could read. There was no organising of books by any kind of banding system – we used the 'five finger test' to see if books were at the right level. If there were five words on the page they could not read, they chose another book. Once they had a book they could read I would write down the errors they made and make comments like, 'needs to read more quickly... or fluently... or with expression...'

Another two-and-a-half hours per week were spent on story time. By 3pm we'd all be back in the reading corner for story time. Many teachers never read an entire book to their class – they just grabbed a book and read the opening chapter. At 3.25pm they would invite a child to take it home to finish. Story time had some positives, but it did not engage the whole class and if we asked questions, we only asked the children who had their hands up. So many children could sit and dream, totally unchallenged. In my second year of teaching we had to start filling in a weekly planning sheet. It was A4 and covered all subjects. There was a box for the title of the story we were reading. No rationale for why we were reading it or what we would do with it. Just the name.

We also did group reading – which was good, if the child's reading age was 8+. It provided opportunities for those who could read to practise fluency, expression and to develop stamina. If you could not read, group reading did not teach you.

But wait. Only eleven hours of the week has been taken up so far with not teaching reading. There must have been something else. There was – paired reading.

So my Year 6 class would go and read with Year 3. Very nice for those who could. The special needs teacher would come and take the non-readers to a room where they 'read' predictable texts and used picture cues. Anything rather than be taught how to decode an unfamiliar word.

I remember the advice given when I did some reception class teaching. I should have collections of 'books we know' and 'books we are learning'. When they could all chant a book off by heart – not read it – it went into the 'books we know' box.

In the second half of the 1990s I worked at Perrymount Primary. I learned so much while I was there and really developed as a teacher. I became the English co-ordinator and was very influenced by the 1996 Ofsted report *The Teaching of Reading in 45 Inner London Primary Schools: a critical examination of OFSTED research*.

The report was very critical of how reading was taught (or, more precisely, generally not taught). Key points included:

- Weaknesses in the teaching of reading were apparent *'in one in three of the lessons of Year 2 and nearly half of the lessons in Year 6.'*
- Teacher's phonic knowledge and skills were highlighted as being insufficient and of poor quality. Also, the teaching of higher order and information skills in Year 6 was, in the main, weak.
- The *'amount of time given to teaching reading was over-generous in some classes and was not well managed'*.
- The inspectors considered that listening to individuals, in many cases, *'had become an unproductive routine exercise'*.
- Effective *'teaching of pupils in groups and especially as a whole class, was uncommon'*.

So, prior to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy my classes and I had a great time doing really good work that involved active teaching of reading. Because of that report. It really changed the way I thought about everything and I realised that just doing what everyone else was doing was not enough.

I was in Year 6 again now and the depth of the work we were able to do, because that report had screamed 'teach reading', was fantastic. I know the headteacher Linda Miller was very proud when the school's English Key Stage 2 results were 88 per cent level 4+. They were 18 per cent the previous year.

Teach reading...

In January 2000 I started work as the Deputy Head of Woodberry Down Junior School. In January 2001 I became Acting Head of Woodberry Down Infant School.

It was all, quite frankly, a mess. In September 2001, aged 31 and very under-qualified, I became Headteacher of the newly amalgamated Woodberry Down Community Primary School in Hackney.

It seemed like I faced every conceivable issue and I was not well prepared or supported. One of those issues was that the systems being promoted for teaching reading in early years and Key Stage 1 were just not working. Some children, as they will do, learnt to read in spite of the school. Others did not. Another group could read a bit, but lacked confidence and did not enjoy reading. They were 'stuck' because they possessed such poor decoding skills that reading was always an effort.

In the summer term of my first year the senior teacher, Emma Penzer, heard phonics authority Ruth Miskin speaking and said that I should go and hear her. I did. In September 2002 we started two new reading programmes: rml3 (Ruth Miskin Literacy, now Read Write Inc) and rml2.

I won't go into the battles we had to get these programmes up and running, such as staff not following the programme or wanting to be 'creative' and LA officers being constantly critical.

We carried on, learnt how to teach children to decode and comprehend, and went from being in Ofsted's then 'serious weaknesses' category in 2003 to a place on the outstanding schools list by 2005.

The school began to become more and more associated with phonics, which was still a bit of a dirty word. People would say that the reading programme was prescriptive or ask how children with different learning styles were accommodated. But more and more people were showing an interest in phonics.

In 2006 former HMI Director of Inspection Jim Rose's independent review of the teaching of early-years reading was published and Woodberry Down was one of the schools visited. All three lessons seen were outstanding and, to this day, we have visitors referred to us by that particular HMI.

In 2007 we contributed to Channel 4's *Lost for Words* season and we were featured in the programme *Dispatches*. Rigorous teaching at Woodberry Down was contrasted with other approaches, including supposedly developing a love of books in a primary school that had set up a 'Forest School'.

In the early part of 2008 we did some filming with Read Write Inc and later in the year Woodberry Down was again judged outstanding. The achievement was all the more remarkable given we had just federated with a school in special measures and three key staff had moved to that school, including the Deputy Head.

In 2010 Ofsted were back for the *Reading by Six* report. We also did some filming for a Teacher's TV programme called Early Reading. Woodberry Down was contrasted with a school that used reading recovery as a method for teaching reading.

In 2011 I appeared on a live breakfast TV discussion about the phonics check with Christine Blower from the NUT. Mrs Blower claimed that there was a 'problem' with the sounds in the word 'bought'. I was able to reassure her that there is no such problem with the sound. There are three sounds and the spellings of those sounds (the graphemes) is 'b', 'ough' and 't'. Mrs Blower's misconception was why we need to teach phonics. If we just think of the sound 'or' as in 'for' and don't teach children all the graphemes for 'or' – that's when we can run into problems.

Graphemes for 'or' include:

- floor
- saw
- naughty
- author

In early 2012 I did a few radio programmes, including *Woman's Hour* and *Call You and Yours*. It was very clear that lots of people really did not understand what a good synthetic phonics school was all about. It was also clear that many people were only doing a little bit of phonics and were hanging on to what they referred to as 'other methods'.¹

In 2012 Woodberry Down had another Ofsted inspection. Phonics came out as one of the major strengths. By this point there were five schools in our federation and it would be fair to say that Woodberry Down had been really stretched.

So being able to walk into the staffroom after the inspection, seeing everyone going silent, wondering if the bottles of champagne were for celebration or sorrow, and being able to say that Woodberry Down was, again, 'outstanding' and seeing everyone's obvious pride – was a great feeling.

¹ Other methods do not exist – they meant using picture cues or guessing the word.

It is a school that we all have a lot of pride in. Looking around the staffroom now, I can see three colleagues who were on the RML phonics programme, in the group I taught. One is working with us part-time and is studying at King's College London. Another is also part-time while pursuing other studies and the last is working full-time pending university. If I look round a bit more – there are other staff, former RML phonics graduates – one at university and one on the way.

Phonics was a central part of Woodberry Down's road to recovery and now, 10 years later, plays just as vital a role as ever it did. One of the reasons I think it has been key to our improvement is that it is a systematic and rigorous way of learning to read – and learning with pace. Through the use of assessment and tracking data pupils are 'keeping up, not catching up' and no child slips through the net. There is a direct application of learnt sounds to reading and writing on a daily basis. The teachers have high expectations and there is a high level of success with children with English as an additional language (EAL).

In one sense the evidence speaks for itself. In 2003 the school was in the Ofsted category of 'serious weaknesses'. Since then it has been placed on the Ofsted's Outstanding Providers list three times – once for every Woodberry Down inspection.

So what does this all mean for you? You are a middle leader, new to your role, or maybe with more experience. It means this: wherever you are leading, you have to know about the teaching of literacy – and you need to start with reading.

If you really understand and get synthetic phonics you do not need to read any more. But if you have not been fortunate enough to work in one of the relatively few, really good synthetic phonics schools, please read on.

Wherever you are leading it will almost certainly involve literacy and there will be issues about children who cannot access something because of *perceived* poor literacy skills. You need to adopt the mindset that 'poor literacy skills' probably means 'has not been taught effectively' or 'has been failed'.

So then what? Well, you are a leader and one of your roles is to ensure change. If staff you are managing are encountering difficulties because of the reading ability of pupils you need to know that this is your call for action. Don't start to devise strategies which will lead to the pupil not needing to read or write. This is not effective strategic leadership and, more importantly, it is unfair.

So what do you do?

- You are a maths teacher and have no knowledge of teaching reading...
- You are a Year 2 teacher who does all she can and is consistently outstanding in Ofsted terms
- but your children slip after they leave you...

You need to make sure you know what the best practice is in teaching reading. This means exerting your entitlement to CPD and visiting a school that is well-known for having a really systematic approach to teaching reading. Visit a school that will take you around the various 'learn to read' groups from Reception to the end of Year 2.

So pick the right school and sit in on a range of lessons. If you do this, whatever your level/area of responsibility you will learn the answer to ensuring success for every child.

And you are welcome to come and see us, of course!

Additional information for school leaders on using synthetic phonics

If you are not responsible for either teaching or overseeing the teaching of reading (for example, you may be a subject teacher in a secondary school) the brief description below is intended to support your learning from Greg Wallace's opinion piece.

Synthetic phonics

Definition:

Synthetic phonics is the systematic teaching of letter sounds and the application of learnt phonemes (speech sounds) to word level work (blending and segmenting).

Process:

- Pupils are taught the 44 speech sounds.
- Pupils are taught pure sounds (no 'schwa' – /c/ not 'cuh') to aid efficient and accurate blending (needed for reading) and segmenting (for spelling).

Neither consonant clusters (/b/ /l/ not /bl/) nor onset and rime (/m/ /a/ /t/ not /m/ /at/) are used in synthetic phonics. (The / words represents the segmentation of the phonemes. There are three phonemes in mat (m/a/t). You sound three phonemes – the phoneme for 'm', the phoneme for 'a' and the phoneme for 't'. In onset and rime, you sound the first phoneme m/ and then children learn to put the other two phonemes together to form a commonly used sound thus giving two parts to the word mat (m/at). They then will know c/at, b/at. In synthetic phonics the focus is on the learning of the 44 phonemes to blend and segment words to read and spell.)

- Pupils are introduced to the transparent code (eg the /c/ in cat) before progressing onto more complex representations of the sound (eg the /c/ in chemist).
- Both the reading and writing of discrete sounds and whole words are taught through phonemic knowledge.

Modelling

1. Phonics

Using clear enunciation of sounds, pupils learn and practise with increasing speed to develop rapid recognition.

Steps to assist blending (moving towards independent blending) include exaggerated pronunciation of sounds within words to emphasise links between cat (written word) to /c/ /a/ /t/ (phonemes) to 'cat' (spoken word).

Pupils practise daily.

Steps to assist spelling include exaggerated pronunciation of sounds within words to emphasise links between 'cat' (spoken word) to /c/ /a/ /t/ (phonemes) to cat (written word).

Pupils practise daily and also use repetition and review.

2. Reading

Different types of reads help pupils decode, comprehend and read with fluency and expression.

Links are made to other stories and experiences.

- Decoding read: Use of phonic knowledge to read the story
- Comprehension read: Discussion of the story - literal and inferential questioning
- Expressive read: Demonstration of storyteller's voice (using vocabulary, punctuation, prompt questions such as, 'How is the character feeling?'). Pupils practise and apply.

3. Writing

Activities to teach encoding and language production (direct application of phonic knowledge).

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Biographical details

Greg Wallace has been the Headteacher of Woodberry Down Community Primary School in Hackney since 2001. Woodberry Down is now the lead school in the five-school Best Start Federation, of which Greg is Executive Principal. It is also a National Teaching School and a National Support School. You can read more about the work of the federation at www.beststart.org.uk.

The school has been widely recognised for a range of significant achievements including our use of phonics and our approach to marking. See www.effectivemarking.co.uk for more details.

The school has a comprehensive website at www.woodberrydown.net.

Greg has served on a number of government reviews including Lord Bew's review of Key Stage 2 testing, the review of professional standards for teachers and the review of entry-level skills tests for teachers.

Greg's current focus is on developing the teaching of maths. All federation schools are teaching the draft maths national curriculum.

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Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk
www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege

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